

Globalisation, social democracy and cosmopolitan politics

Article (Accepted Version)

Martell, Luke (2008) Globalisation, social democracy and cosmopolitan politics. Re-public: Re-imagining democracy. ISSN 1791-857X

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Luke Martell – Globalisation, social democracy and cosmopolitan politics

A version of this is published on *Re-public* website <http://www.re-public.gr/en/> March 2008

Social democracy needs to differentiate itself from liberal and market approaches as well as learn from them, and to remember the importance of state and international forms of politics that are short of fully-blown globalism. It needs to maintain a bit of scepticism about possibilities for dialogic deliberation in cosmopolitan fora and an awareness of the importance of state and conflict politics.

Globalisation has created many challenges for contemporary politics. The response of some social democrats has been to propose resituating democracy in liberal and pluralist cosmopolitan institutions at a global level, in a way that can help achieve social democratic ends such as equality and social justice.

Why global politics?

Why has the focus shifted to the global level? The world is seen by some to have moved from one where states are self-determining and define their own ideas of justice and where interference, whether by other states or global actors in states' affairs, is ruled out. Now there is a stronger emphasis on universal ideas of justice, such as human rights. Interference in the affairs of states in the name of such ideas is seen as more justified, for instance by major powers in contexts such as Kosovo or global institutions enforcing human rights, the International Criminal Court, for example.

Two world wars in the twentieth century and the possibility of nuclear devastation during the cold war have led to a desire for global institutions that bring nations together in co-operation, to prevent such possibilities in the future. Subsequently the end of the cold war led us from a bipolar world to one where common norms and institutions across the globe are more possible.

Climate change, economic interdependency, crime, the drugs trade, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, world poverty, genocide and human rights abuses: these are caused by combined global factors or are universal issues, and need to be solved by action at a co-ordinated global level or by global intervention. Economic globalisation seems to have improved the fortunes of some, such as China and India. But it has left others out, sub-Saharan Africans for instance, suggesting the need either for the excluded to be more integrated into globalisation or find a route out of poverty outside it, or alternatively for institutions of global redistribution to counter inequality. Global communications and migration have led to more transnational identifications and consciousness that can underpin international political institutions.

Economic globalisation is seen to have compelled states in a neoliberal direction. Governments compete to pursue policies that attract globally mobile capital, leading to a loss of state autonomy over their policies, and more accountability to external unelected investors than to electors. Social democratic policies on tax, welfare, labour protection and wages are especially affected by convergence

around a race to the bottom. For some social democrats this disempowers nation states and has led to proposals for a regulative state for pursuing social democracy at a global level.

Cosmopolitan democracy is proposed by social democrats from Ulrich Beck to David Held, re-establishing sovereignty globally. It is global in the level at which it is situated and in the pluralist scope of actors involved; equalising because actors with different powers in the outside world have an equal vote in cosmopolitan fora; and dialogic and deliberative in the way decisions are made. Democracy is currently organised at national levels while the big decisions are made internationally where there is less accountability. So cosmopolitanism is partly about overcoming this democratic deficit and resituating democracy globally. That there are already IGOs and INGOs makes global politics a realistic possibility rather than a utopian dream.

Why not global politics?

Finding a space for social democracy at the level of global liberal institutions seems to make sense. Why should we have doubts about it?

Many global fora are made by and composed in part of nation-states who bring clashing interests to global politics as much as cosmopolitan feeling. Inequalities between nation-states globally are transferred into the cosmopolitan fora that they make up. So global institutions are as likely to be dominated by conflict and the dominance of the interests of some over others as by consensus. This is the case on issues such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, human rights and free trade.

Cosmopolitan institutions are supposed to be equalising but this is not so where some have more sway because of greater economic, military and political power outside, for instance in the case of US unilateralism and hegemony. The values that are dominant in cosmopolitanism and globalisation – democracy, human rights, capitalism and free markets, for instance – are perceived to be American or Western. Especially western versions of these dominate, for instance individualistic and political ideas of human rights as against social, economic or collective ideas of rights, or development or poverty. These western values are then said to be universal. So for those on the receiving end it feels like westernisation exported.

Furthermore the West's own following of these values appears to be flawed. Democracy is pursued inconsistently, for instance where the USA didn't recognise the legitimacy of Hamas, the elected authority in Palestine. As far as global concerns go, environmental measures may be avoided when it is not perceived to be in nations' self-interests, as in the case of US reluctance in climate change negotiations. Global interventions may driven by geostrategic factors rather than justice. Why interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan and not Sudan and Rwanda?

There is a lack of self-practising of cosmopolitan and global values such as human rights, environmental protection, free trade and democracy, for instance in Guantanamo Bay, the USA's reluctance to participate in the International Criminal Court and climate change agreements, US and EU protectionism, the role of money in elections in the US, and the bypassing of the UN in the Iraq war. The US, the world's leading power, seems unwilling to subject itself to cosmopolitan norms except where it suits them.

Globalisation may politically (as well as economically) not be the best route for poorer countries. Globalisation has not been the route to success for all and richer countries protect themselves from competition from developing countries. Poorer countries may be better off disengaging partially from global politics and economics, trading with each other and forming regional groupings. They may have a better chance at sub-global levels making deals with each other and like-minded nations than they will participating fully in globalisation economically or politically.

If economic globalisation does not undermine social democracy at state level then global social democracy may not be as necessary as it appears. The state has considerable importance within its own boundaries especially in terms of spending and policies on areas such as education and welfare. There are differences in economic culture and political systems between nations that lead to different policies, despite globalisation. Scandinavian countries and Germany, for instance, have had relatively high taxes and big welfare states despite being globalised. Latin American governments have been able to default on loans or nationalise major energy companies yet maintain the confidence of investors. Convergence on inflation and deficits is greater than on spending, social provisions and tax. Electorates may seek compensatory social democratic policies of welfare and education to protect them from the effects of globalisation. In fact a social democratic infrastructure of health, education and welfare may be attractive to businesses if it gives them a better workforce and lowers their own costs in such areas. So the nation-state may be able to pursue social democracy under economic globalisation making a social democratic state at a global level seem less necessary.

State, conflict and sub-global politics

So there is a role for state, conflict and sub-global politics in achieving social democratic ends as well as for global cosmopolitan deliberation.

1) Nation-states still matter. There are national differences in state policies and there is space for social democracy at state level. So the politics of issues such as social justice and rights still involve nation-states strongly and these are one alternative to cosmopolitan democracy.

2) Nation-states are building blocks for globalisation, and nation-state interests clashing undermine cosmopolitan democracy. This leads to conflict rather than cosmopolitan politics at a global level. It is right to be oriented to global

institutions but this may need to be on the basis of conflicting interests rather than deliberative cosmopolitanism.

3) A third alternative is international politics at sub-global level. States may be best off organising outside globalisation because of the sway of more powerful states. Actors can form international alliances regionally, bilaterally or multilaterally, trading agreements for instance, with other nations who are likeminded ideologically or where there are resources of mutual interest. President Chavez of Venezuela recognises that politics needs to be international and beyond the nation, but based on conflicting interests between some powers globally, while interests in common with others on a sub-global international level.

It's right to re-orient from national to global politics because many serious world problems are global and require global co-ordination. An attempt to pursue social democratic ends through liberal political institutions at a global level is to be applauded and this article is not an argument against that.

But it is important for social democracy to maintain its critique of liberalism as well. Cosmopolitanism may be too liberal in its optimism about pluralism and dialogue and its insensitivity to conflicting economic material interests which counteract political and cultural bases for cosmopolitanism. When you bring a critical and socialist perspective to the possibilities for cosmopolitan democracy other forms of politics seem as possible.

Social democracy needs to differentiate itself from liberal and market approaches as well as learn from them and to remember the importance of state and international forms of politics which are short of fully-blown globalism. It needs to maintain a bit of scepticism about possibilities for dialogic deliberation in cosmopolitan fora and an awareness of the importance of state and conflict politics.